

THE NEWS LETTER

OF THE COLLEGE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

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English Composition In the Harvard Report

(The report of a Harvard Committee on "General Education in a Free Society" is "must" reading for all of our membership. With the permission of the Committee we reprint its recommendations for a program of Composition teaching at Harvard.—Ed.)

" . . . We realize that composition is a never-ending discipline which can be only begun in schools and must be continued in college. But most college teachers, and this seems to be true in virtually every country, complain that the high schools do not equip their students with the capacity to write their own language clearly and grammatically, and that, therefore, the colleges must do a kind of work in composition which the schools should have done and which the schools should be able to do better than the colleges. The result has been that in most colleges there is some remedial requirement in English composition. At Harvard English A has been required of nearly all freshmen. It has already been observed that this course, the one which is taken by the largest number of Harvard students, does not count toward fulfilling the distribution requirements. This is evidently an indication of the faculty belief that English A has to do largely with the technique of writing and is not primarily a course in subject matter, that it is calculated to develop a skill rather than to explore a field of learning.

"The present requirement in English composition has the merit of placing responsibility for improvement in the writing of English in a single agency. It has the corresponding weakness of segregating training in writing from the fields of learning. Since the responsibility for training in written communication is vested in the staff of English A, the other members of the faculty too often feel that they have little if any responsibility for the development of skill and facility in writing. This seems to us a serious weakness. What is desired is not primarily skill in writing literary English or about English literature. Training in composition should not be associated with the English Department only. It should be functional to the curriculum, a significant part of the student's college experience. It should, so far as is feasible, be associated with training in general education rather than with a single course or department. We realize that if training in composition is everyone's responsibility, it may become no one's, but we believe that the ends sought by the present English A requirement can be better achieved

by the modification of the existing system.

"We propose that in place of English A as now given there be substituted a procedure which will be more directly connected with the introductory courses in general education. It is assumed that all students will take at least one of the introductory courses in general education in their first year and that most freshmen will take two of these courses. We propose that during the first half of the freshman year the work in composition be limited to two class hours a week or one class and one conference hour, the emphasis to be placed upon the essential techniques and skills in writing. This would be required of all students who could not pass a test comparable in difficulty to that existing during the past few years. The bulk of the freshman class would, in other words, be required to do what might be called remedial work in English composition during the first semester of their freshman year. Even among those students who are required to take this training there will probably be such great disparities in previous education, as well as in capacity, that it will be essential to separate them into sections by accomplishment and ability.

"During the second term of the freshman year the work in English composition would be required of all students. It would be given, not separately, but in connection with the courses in general education then being taken by the student. The classes in composition would, as classes, cease to meet. In their place the students would be expected to write frequent themes in connection with their general education course or courses. During the first experimental years the writing would probably be directed and corrected by the instructors in composition, but it is hoped that later all instructors in these courses might share in the task. Instructors in composition thus would come to have an intimate relation to the courses in general education. So far as proves feasible they should become members of their staffs. They would be expected to hold conferences with each student on each theme. Such individual conferences should more than compensate in educational value for the absence of formal classes in English composition during the second term.

"It seems to us that there should be no additional course credit for this work in English composition, but that it should be thought of as an integral part of the general education requirement, one of the stages in the process of improving the capacity to communicate thought, as well as further training in systematic analysis, in evaluation, and in the discernment of relevance."

The Bush Report and The Study of English

In November, 1944, when the war seemed on its way to a successful end, President Roosevelt wrote a letter to Dr. Vannevar Bush, director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development. In brief, he asked four things: how the government should release wartime secrets for peacetime use, what the government should do in the war against disease, what it should do to aid public and private research, and what it should do to develop young scientists.

The result was a 184-page book, *Science — the Endless Frontier*, prepared by four committees of distinguished scientists under Dr. Bush and issued by the Government Printing Office last July. Dr. Bush gave his summary report in 34 pages and then presented the full reports of the four committees, each dealing with one of the President's questions.

All the committees stuck closely to their tasks, and there are hardly any references to the social sciences and the humanities. There are vague bows in our direction in phrases like "Science is only a member of a team," and "Science must not try to hog it all." But after such bows the committees return to their laboratories and close the doors. There is only one incidental reference to literature (p. 170).

Why then should this report concern us? Because these recommendations in the fields of science are so large and so expensive that, if they are accepted, English scholars may be reduced to selling apples. Let me cite several items.

On pages 28-31 is a proposal for a National Research Foundation—purposes, members, organization, functions. Note that the word "science" does not occur in the name of this body, but its five divisions, its purposes and its functions are all scientific. It would consist of about 34 members, all scientists, financed by the government at salaries of \$50 a day while on Foundation business though not over \$10,000 a year. This group would control governmental awards of about \$122,000,000 per year for scientific research—laboratory buildings and equipment, scholarships, international meetings, salaries and projects.

In detail, the subsidy for scholarships would establish 6,000 annual undergraduate scholarships (each for 4 years) and 300 annual graduate fellowships (each for 3 years) for scientific students only. These would pay what the GI bill of rights does: tuition and other fees up to \$500 annually, plus \$50 per school month for support of single persons and \$75 for married students. These awards would be based solely on intelli-

gence tests and school records — and not on sex, race, color, creed, or financial need. Once fully operating, this plan would regularly support about 25,000 scientific students at an annual cost of \$29,000,000.

What would be the result of such subsidies? In college, and earlier in high school and later in adult life, there would be an increased emphasis on science and its financial rewards. It is a trite truth that one of the chief faults in American civilization is our great progress in natural science and mechanics as compared with our haphazard development in government, social relations, culture and philosophy. The proposed governmental subsidies will increase this gap; "law for things" will be more important than "law for man".

It seems to me that the C.E.A. and similar organizations should strive promptly to defend their interests — and the common good. To this end I offer three suggestions.

(1) That we collect data on our own wartime deficits in students. The scientists have their impressive figures, already well publicized: 150,000 bachelors of science lost in the Second World War and an estimated more than 16,000 doctors lost between 1941 and 1955. These losses are the basis for their plea for federally financed scholarships. What are our deficits?

(2) That we unite with other humanistic and social science organizations to work for a revision of the scholarship plan so that each student will be free to choose his field of study. The balanced progress of this nation needs not only scientists and medical doctor as but also economists, philosophers, psychologists, musicians, writers and English teachers.

(3) That we formulate our needs and our aims in terms of national and international usefulness rather than Ph.D. requirements. Whether or not we need governmental subsidies, we do need intelligent students, and to attract them, we need something more useful than the Ph.D. routine. Already junior colleges, engineering schools and adult education directors have complained that our products do not fit their teaching needs. Unless we can formulate a program that will interest Congressmen and high school seniors, we shall be just another slow casualty of the atomic bomb.

W. L. Werner,
Penna. State College.

"I definitely think that the CEA has not even begun to do its work, which is likely to be much more important after the war than now."

Henry S. Canby.

THE NEWS LETTER

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Editorial

Your Executive Secretary takes this occasion to announce his retirement from office and to announce as his successor Associate Professor Robert T. FitzHugh of the University of Maryland. May he put up a good fight for English as the bulwark of a general education, as the keystone in the arch of liberal studies. At least he has a fighting name!

During the past six years our young Association has held its membership despite a depression and a war—and what a war! Our News Letter has appeared uninterruptedly and carried the notions and opinions of our membership, always with the idea in the editorial mind that it might serve in its intimate and informal and single-hearted fashion to draw our members a little nearer together. If the new editor attempts to build it at once into just another pedagogical periodical (dressed up in covers) the retiring editor will haunt him.

Six years, when they have contained wars and floods and earthquakes and pestilences, may seem very long indeed. But any six years which happen to lie between the ages of sixty and seventy, are all too short, whatever they may contain. There is too much which clamors to be done in them: books to be read; books to be written; memory's files to be dusted and rearranged; the garden of friendship to be carefully cultivated, with especial attention to the perennials and those rusty-looking old bulbs which most surprisingly may sprout anew. But some tasks which demand attention should be turned over to younger men, and this is one of them. So your

Secretary-Editor is bidding farewell to a long list of names written upon stencil-plates; and in this sentimental moment he is aflame with curiosity to know just what the lot of you really look like!

Whether or not CEA will hold a formal annual meeting in Chicago in December is a problem which is now cooking. But no annual meeting of any such society ever brought together more than a small percentage of the membership. For that reason the CEA Constitution provides a method of electing officers and submitting measures to the membership for adoption by mail. Such an association would reach its summit of effectiveness and solidarity if every time a few members, representing more than one college, found themselves together in one place they immediately declared it to be a meeting of the Association and proceeded at once to transact business and then to send in a report to the NEWS LETTER. The business of our Association being to exchange professional ideas and professional gossip, and engage in stimulating argument, and become better acquainted.

Royalties accruing from the sale of "Freedom Speaks", amounting to \$390.00 have been deposited in the CEA treasury, following the wishes of the compiling committee, Professors George Reynolds and Donald F. Connors. The Directors are under obligation to see that this sum is applied to some worthy purpose related to the objectives of our Association.

Members John N. Yarnall and Mildred Wilsey have been asked to represent CEA at the ceremonies attendant upon the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of Wilson College.

Contributions to the November News Letter should be sent at once to Professor R. T. FitzHugh, University of Maryland, College Park, Md. They should, until further notice, be restrained in length and unrestrained in pungent quality.

Gleaned from the Mail

Dear Editor:

Your News Letter editorial on "Good English" has come to my attention, and I was most interested to read your discussion of writing "rules" based on accuracy, clarity and good taste.

In connection with your recommendations for writing that is fresh and flexible within the bounds of good grammar, I thought your readers might like to know some of the thinking behind what has come to be known as "TIME style."

TIME's editors will tell you there is really no such thing as "TIME style"—that what people call TIME style is simply compact, functional news writing. With much to tell in a few minutes of a reader's time, the language of TIME has to be direct and vivid.

Several years ago a study of TIME's vocabulary appeared in the magazine *American Speech*,

published by the Columbia University Press. Said the author, "Of all the journalistic phenomena of our age, TIME is linguistically the most interesting. Here for the first time is a popular medium of information whose editors are using the language boldly and freely."

Three books, so the story goes, were on the desk of TIME'S editor when TIME'S first issue went to press—the Bible, Xenophon's *Anabasis*, and the *Iliad*.

Of the three, the *Iliad* seemed to have the most immediate influence on TIME writing. Homer's "wine-dark sea" and "far-darting Apollo" were the parents of "jam-packed bowl," "spade-bearded anthropologist" and many another space-saving phrase in TIME.

TIME's telescoped nouns—"socialite," "radiator," "guesstimate"—were similarly coined to get one word to do the work of two or more. This kind of economy led us to use the "&" symbol in such stock combinations as "safe & sane," "ham & eggs," "husband & wife," each of which, as sense goes, is practically one word.

But TIME editors look with loathing on the idea that we hold classes to teach our writers "TIME style." (Some people seem to think we do.) Many a man wanting to write for TIME has been turned down because samples of his work showed he was an imitator of TIME—as he imagined it—instead of a writer of direct, vivid, sense-making English.

Parodies of TIME usually begin like "Outraged was snaggletoothed, bilious, ambidextrous Herman Zilch . . ." But nowadays TIME editors do not think highly of backward syntax except as an occasional way of emphasizing a point. Space saving sometimes forces us to use a string of adjectives, to give a thumbnail sketch, but we prefer nouns that make adjectives unnecessary.

In looking for such nouns TIME has introduced some words into everyday speech. The best known is "tycoon" but there have been several others such as "pundit," "kudos," "moppet." We adopted "tycoon" in TIME's early years after discarding "mogul" and "titan" as too shopworn, and "hospodar" and "beglerbeg" as too obscure. We needed "tycoon" because otherwise our writers had to beat all around the vocabulary to describe a man of great wealth whose power and influence rivaled those of government heads. In "tycoon" (from the Chinese *ta*, "great," and *kuin*, "prince") the Japanese had a word for it. So we borrowed it.

We try to save space with our verbs too. Why say "walked vigorously" if we can say "strode," "marched," "tramped" or "stomped" and be quicker as well as more explicit?

There is one deliberate exception to TIME'S rule of directness: the captions under TIME'S pictures. Many of these are not aimed to tell a story but to advertise some of its curiosities. TIME readers divide sharply in their reactions: some are irritated; some titillated.

P. I. Prentice,
Publisher, TIME.

Dear Editor:

Every teacher of literature is, or should be, a 'seller' of books. Unfortunately, however, the adolescent mind prefers soda-water to books. How to persuade it to invest in good mental nourishment is a major problem in schools and colleges. An initial handicap lies in the fact that pupils have been accustomed to the state's buying their books for them.

May I suggest two plans which have made headway toward overcoming the indifference above mentioned? In my advanced classes instead of asking for, say, a ten-page summary and critique of a work, I have let students mark up their personal copy of a classic with marginal comment, supplemented by a succinct statement of their reactions to it in the flyleaves at the end. Whether the new method is actually easier than the old I am not prepared to say, but I rejoice in the fact that the students prefer it and that now a book becomes a real possession.

The other device is a series of prizes offered annually by a downtown bookstore for the best library acquired by a student during his college career. The size or cost of the collection is considered of less importance than careful selection, good printing and editing. The books should reflect a well-balanced personality and an intelligent interest in the contents, that is, they should give evidence of having been read. Textbooks are ruled out, because there is no virtue in necessity. Competitors must afford satisfactory evidence that the books are their own and that they have been acquired during the period of competition. I am pleased to report that at least a dozen competitors have vied each year for the three prizes of \$50, \$30, and \$20, and that interest in the contest is steadily mounting.

—Ernest E. Leisy,
Southern Methodist Univ.

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Postwar Literature Courses—A Reply

In the September issue of *The News Letter* Professor George F. Reynolds argues against the survey course in English Literature and proposes as a substitute a course in selected English and American authors of vital interest to students today. As a matter of record, this is not a new proposal, for courses in great literature or great authors have long been prominent side-by-side with survey courses. And a teacher can present great literature as such even in a survey course, without omitting

the development of literature, if he eliminates fourth-rate works. But I am now chiefly interested in Professor Reynolds' details for his course in great authors—authors who will interest students—authors who will teach students to read aesthetically. These details include:

"A little Bacon; the Fight of the Revenge; a little Pepys; and abridged Pilgrim's Progress."

"Pope's Essay on Man; part of Gulliver; a few essays by Addison and Steele; a little Boswell; at least two or three pages from Burke. The cult of the complete classic should be abandoned."

First, the *Essay on Man* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, for instance, of vital interest to students today? I think not.

Of more import, consider the attack on the complete classic. This point of view, by no means peculiar to Professor Reynolds, is, it seems to me, more than questionable; it is pernicious. When successful, it destroys at least half the values of literature; it destroys the totality of effect of a work; it destroys any possible comprehensive philosophy of life an author may have; it destroys the form of literature; it destroys style. Substance without style is not literature. Fragments emasculate literature—skeletonize it. Only complete classics teach students to read with aesthetic appreciation—as Professor Reynolds desires. A few short extracts from the *Areopagitica* could contain its central ideas. But the student who reads only these extracts will soon forget these ideas; he has not soared with Milton to the empyrean of freedom.

The cult of a little-of-this-and-a-little-of-that is connected with the current popularity of digests and is instanced by the composite *Freedom Speaks*. I was present at the Indianapolis meeting of the College English Association at which this anthology was conceived; I responded with "enthusiasm." Later, I wrote to the publisher for the prospectus. I received one of the first available copies of *Freedom Speaks*—and I experienced my most intense disappointment ever provoked by a textbook. Within only two hundred sixty-four pages I found nearly two hundred selections. I do not condemn the substance of *Freedom Speaks*. But this anthology is, for the most part, the mere skeleton of literature. Two lines of the *Areopagitica* have no place in the college classroom.

Let us all defend the teaching of the complete classic—when we are certain that the work in a classic, that the work is literature.

John P. Emery
Temple University

Literature of Literature

Dear Editor:

All accused persons are supposed, by the common law, to be allowed to testify in their own defence, though in academic circles this rule is more honored in the breach than in the observance; so Robert M. Smith's protest in the *May News Letter* must be treated

gently. But it seems to me a very weak defence. Look around you and in the general ignorance of, and indifference to great English literature you will find our monument. The test of the teaching of English literature is not whether people who would have enjoyed novelists, dramatists and poets, even untaught, remember with gratitude and affection some of the teachers they encountered, but whether we have taught our appreciation of literature to the majority of students.

This question of letting the students read the literature as literature is more important than we realize. Because of the deadly weight of the German Ph. D. we have inclined to teach everything in literature except what makes it literature. Social criticism in Shakespeare, in Fielding, in Robert Burns; "Political reform" in Milton, in Shelley, in Trollope; Science in Matthew Arnold, in G. B. Shaw, in Whosis; we send the students looking for those tidbits as if they were on a paper chase. I personally should not be surprised to find that a teacher felt flushed with victory if he had done painstaking work on polysyllables in the speeches of Shakespeare's villains, or made his students keep a careful list of all the flora and fauna encountered in Pope. This is good precision training. It calls for all the Sherlock Holmes in us. But it will not let the student discover that there are real people in Shakespeare, melodious lines in Milton, and a strange kind of elusive magic in Keats. The new school of English literature teachers, who believe that the literature is the important thing, will make their mistakes. They cannot make a bigger mess of the teaching of great literature than has been made since 1900. The best thing we can do is not point with pride to a few men—and no women among them, I notice!—whom we admire, and shut our eyes to the stultification of the teaching of English literature under the demand to turn it into an offshoot of science. The study of Greek and Latin literatures has received deadly blows from those who delighted in chasing obscure grammatical problems into corners and there annihilating them. Ignorance of the material taught is only in a small way to blame; it is our insistence on being "detached" and "scholarly" that is the chief enemy. The mangled remains of Chaucer after he has been separated into influences from medieval theology, references to or borrowings from classical and contemporary authors, the gossip of the time and the culture of the world he lived in may not dismay the literary surgeons who performed the operations, but Chaucer has been thoroughly killed. Certainly we need advanced students who are interested in those influences, even if five times out of ten at least, the authors concerned were unconscious of them; but we do not need this work done on every author or literary work studied. If the student knows his Old or New Testament, allusions to them will enrich his appreciation of authors who turn familiarly to the great stories

or the noble language of the King James version; if he does not know the Testaments, all the footnotes in the world will not make the reference bring beauty to the passage.

If ever there was a time to beat our hearts and cry out "Mea Culpa", this is the moment, when this same deadly technical enemy that has half-killed literature has almost wiped out our world. We are too like the Dormouse, and our sleeps are long and deep. One of the most encouraging qualities of the writers to *News Letter* is this self-examination and contrition, really honest and really bewildered. Let's stay awake at least for a few years.

Anne B. Hart.

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